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Bad Moon Rising
An Analysis of Tet for Today

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Fundamentals of Military Thought and Strategy

Seminar G

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"I see a bad moon rising. I see trouble on the way. I see earthquakes and lightening. . . . Hope you are quite prepared to die."
J. C. Fogerty, Credence Clearwater Revival, 1969

Introduction

Discussing the current problems in Kosovo and Bosnia with a friend recently, he commented to me that the solution seemed simple enough, if we as a nation just had the guts and brains to use our clearly superior power. After all, we are, without a doubt, the most powerful nation on the earth. There is no way that a Serbia, Bosnia, or Kosovo can compete with us, militarily or otherwise. "So why," he asked, "don't we just use our military might to convince them to do what we want?"

While I was trying to come up with a clear explanation of why it isn't that simple, the Vietnam War came to mind. The answer to my friend's question seems rooted in an understanding of the nature and purpose of war, and in particular, the war that you are considering entering. Our war in Vietnam exemplifies what can happen when the nature of the war is misunderstood or ignored, and when the war's purpose is unclear. Clausewitz said that "the first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature." The Tet Offensive of January 1968 and its aftermath provide a superb case study of the importance of understanding the nature and purpose of war. The utility of such a study is to apply the understanding gained through

the analysis to future conflict, to avoid repeating old mistakes, and hopefully, to help me explain to my friend why using military power is never simple.

The Nature of the Vietnam War

War is a conflict of opposing wills and should be considered from the perspective of each of the combatants involved. This interplay of action and reaction among commanders, statesmen and nations on all sides of the conflict contributes to the complex nature of any war. During the Vietnam War, the United States and North Vietnam saw the nature of this war very differently

For the United States, the Vietnam War was a limited war for limited objectives. Simply stated, we wanted to ensure a free, independent, non-communist South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese communists (backed by China and the Soviet Union) were attempting to overthrow the government of South Vietnam by both insurgency and conventional means. Our commitment to South Vietnam was that of a powerful ally, committed to strengthen them politically and militarily. Our gradually escalating military commitment--first with advisors, then air strikes, then multiple combat divisions on the ground--without a declaration of war, reflected our attempt to apply just enough military power to achieve our limited objectives

Our limited objective of an independent South Vietnam also led us to adopt a defensive strategy, one aimed at fighting the insurgency and incursions into South Vietnam, without taking the fight offensively into North Vietnam. Limited wars by their nature are frustrating to military commanders and can be

unsatisfying to the nation that supports them. How much blood and treasure a nation is willing to spend in war is directly dependent on the value of the objective being pursued. By purposefully limiting the objective of our involvement in Vietnam, both in means and ends, we limited the support of the American people and congress. As the cost of the Vietnam War increased, it came to exceed the value of our objective--as seen by the majority of the people. This mismatch between cost and value of the objective became obvious in the wake of the Tet offensive and directly led to the end of our participation in the war.

In contrast with our limited objective, the objective of North Vietnam was a total one, the overthrow and replacement of the regime in South Vietnam. This had been their objective since 1945, pursued first against the French then later against the South Vietnamese and Americans. This clear, consistent objective led North Vietnam to adopt an offensive strategy, using both conventional units and unconventional guerrilla forces to bring down the government of South Vietnam, a government weakened by corruption and mismanagement.

As American military strength in Vietnam grew from 1963 to 1967, it became obvious to the leadership of North Vietnam that they could not defeat the American military directly, and that they would have to take a more indirect approach to achieve their aim. They correctly assessed that South Vietnam's strategic center of gravity was their alliance with the United States. If that

alliance could be broken, if North Vietnamese actions could result in America withdrawing its military support, then North Vietnam could continue its effort to overthrow South Vietnam militarily.

As the war continued through 1967, a critical vulnerability in our strategy and the way we were conducting the war became obvious to the North Vietnamese leadership. To emphasize domestic issues, the Johnson administration had made a concerted effort to keep the American public uninvolved in the Vietnam War. While attempting to run the war with only his administration--using the military as nothing but a "tool"--President Johnson and his advisors failed to understand that war often takes a course of its own, regardless of the moderating influences applied to it. By purposefully avoiding a declaration of war and gradually increasing the number of Americans involved in the war, President Johnson was attempting to limit the conduct of the war in consonance with his limited objective and domestic concerns. As the violence of the war gained momentum and Americans began to question the cost, the administration, still trying to keep the war a side issue, reassured the public that we were winning and the end was in sight. President Johnson needed to convince America that the war was under control.

Wars, however, are very difficult to control. War by its nature is a violent endeavor. The violence and killing of war create a momentum of their own, raising the passion and ire of the people. In America, by not invoking the passion of the people to support the war, President Johnson set the stage for

their passion to oppose it. As Americans watched the war on the evening news, the violence and killing were real to them, and the pictures they were seeing didn't seem to fit the story the administration was telling. Many Americans were dissatisfied with this limited war, and they began to let their government know it. Tet would become the turning point for public support of the war

The Tet Offensive

The leadership of North Vietnam saw American anti-war sentiment as a critical vulnerability. They developed a plan for a "decisive victory" to force the United States out of the war. "Decisive victory" to the North Vietnamese was not necessarily an overwhelming or dominant victory on the battlefield. "Decisive" in this case means leading to a decision, a decision made at a political level. In this context, victory on the field of battle is irrelevant; causing a political decision as a result of the battle is the key. Looking at the American political and military situation in mid-1967, the leadership of North Vietnam decided the time was right for an offensive to achieve a decisive victory. If they could exploit the influence of American public opinion on political leadership, particularly in an election year, they could cause the United States to rethink the value--and cost--of its support to South Vietnam. With public support for the war already in question, a successful North Vietnamese offensive could convince Americans that the war was not worth the sacrifice it entailed.

The North Vietnamese achieved strategic and tactical surprise, and initial success, when they launched the Tet Offensive on January 30, 1968. The

administration, military, and American people were shocked by the size and scope of the North Vietnamese attacks into the cities across South Vietnam. While the tactical advantage of the surprise was quickly overcome, and American and South Vietnamese forces eventually handed the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong a punishing defeat on the battlefield, the surprise--and psychological dislocation--of Tet had far reaching consequences. American confidence in the government's prosecution of the Vietnam War was shattered. Moreover, the administration's confidence in the path they had chosen for this war, and in the military in general, was also gone. As the American people and congress, who saw this as the administration's war, asked for explanations and a restatement of national objectives that would justify the American casualty figures pouring in from Tet, the President had no good answers. The political objective had been lost in the furor over the way the war was unfolding.

American participation in the war, which should have been solidly supported by a coordinated effort of the American government, people, and military, had been built on a narrow foundation lacking the support of the people. Without the coordinating influence of a coherent strategy and a clear purpose, the war had taken a turn unanticipated by the government. The American people, unsure of what they were fighting for, shocked by Tet, and faced with conflicting messages from the television and their government, wanted answers. President Johnson was faced with a decision. Should he follow the course that the war had unexpectedly taken, a course that would require

mobilization of the reserves and an escalation of American involvement? Or, should he continue to limit American commitment and find a way out of the war? He chose the latter, in effect deciding that the cost of the war had exceeded the value of the objective. That the war continued for seven more years and cost tens of thousands more American lives is another story all together

Fundamental misunderstanding and disregard for the nature and purpose of war is at the heart of our failure to achieve our objectives in Vietnam. Should we have known that the Tet offensive was coming? Perhaps. Should we have understood that in war, unexpected things occur and something like a Tet offensive could occur? Absolutely. More than that, an understanding of your enemy's political objectives is key to understanding the nature of the war. The differences in value between the objectives of North Vietnam and the United States led to differences in the amount of effort the nations were willing to expend. The Tet offensive reflected the total effort that North Vietnam was willing to expend in pursuit of its political aim. It also reflected the limited effort the United States was willing to expend in support of its ally, South Vietnam. North Vietnam had succeeded in exploiting our critical strategic vulnerability, the gap between public support for the war and the administration's execution of the war. Tet widened this gap and successfully brought the "decisive victory" North Vietnam sought. Without the military support of her powerful ally, South Vietnam fell to conventional attack in 1975

Conclusion

What is the lesson learned from this brief analysis of the Vietnam War and the Tet offensive? More importantly, how do I explain to my friend the complications inherent in the use of military force in the pursuit of national objectives? It's not as simple as saying "We don't want another Vietnam."

There will never be another Vietnam War or Tet offensive. Each war is unique, different, almost personal in its character. Attempts to compare old wars with new ones can lead to dangerous and incorrect assumptions and actions.

It's also not as simple as avoiding limited wars. Desert Storm was clearly a war for limited objectives, heavily reliant on alliances, and we seem to have gotten that one right. The Bush administration understood the need to bring the American people into the war, as evidenced by President Bush's unambiguous and frequent articulation of the national objectives and purpose of the war to the American people, as well as his pursuit of congressional support for the war

The benefit of analysis is to apply a better understanding of the nature and purpose of war to wars that we would consider entering into. Violent and unpredictable, wars invoke a passion and momentum that can take them in an unexpected direction. Clear coordination of political objectives with a military strategy designed to achieve those objectives and national support for the pursuit of those stated objectives can help moderate the course of a war. However, the incalculable actions of the enemy will still create unforeseen situations and challenges for a nation at war. Any nation should therefore think

long and hard about what they are trying to achieve and how they will achieve it before entering a war Clausewitz advised " . . . not to take the first step without considering the last."

So I should tell my friend first, make no mistake, what is happening in Bosnia and Kosovo today is war. Whether you call it peace operations, or verification of agreements, or something else, we are sending United States military into a place where people in arms are killing each other. Also, it is unclear that our current administration understands the nature of these wars we are entering. If they do, they certainly have not articulated that understanding or the political objectives of the United States in these wars clearly to the American people. It appears that President Clinton does not want American attention or resources diverted from the domestic issues that have been the foundation of his presidency, and therefore has not sought public support for entering these wars. This could lead to a lack of public willingness to accept casualties in pursuit of the political objective. We saw this several years ago in Somalia, when the war took an unexpected turn and we abandoned our inconsistent and unclear objectives at a cost of 18 American lives. In Bosnia we have entered a war with an ongoing commitment of unclear duration. We have just embarked on a completely different type of war in Kosovo with similarly unfocused objectives. So, my friend, we should think long and hard about using military power to exert American influence. I'm afraid that, today, there is cause for concern that once again there may be a "bad moon on the rise" Indeed.